



THE MEGALOSCOPE
ISSUE #7



IT'S FELT LIKE ANOTHER RATHER SLOW couple of months of reading, but when I add it up I've actually read 10 books, which isn't that bad. Not that my speed of reading concerns me, really, what I read is what I read and I don't want to start feeling pressure to read a certain number of books in a year.

You may note some changes in layout and typography this issue. I'm an inveterate fiddler with such things, I agree, but I'm also paying attention to some complaints about reading multi-column layouts in a PDF document, so I'm experimenting with a one-column layout while trying to keep the line lengths from being too long.

Quick Summaries

Science Fiction

***Cold Water* by Dave Hutchinson**

Interesting mix of the spy thriller with science fiction and fantasy elements. The scenario is based on Hutchinson's earlier *Fractured Europe* series. I thought it was OK, but a bit confusing.

[Review here.](#)

***The Mountain in the Sea* by Ray Nayler**

A terrific debut SF novel based on the idea that our first contact with an intelligent alien species might not be on another planet, but on our own. I really liked this and nominated it for this year's Hugo Awards.

[Review here.](#)

Crime/Thriller

***Dead Lions* by Mick Herron**

The second book in the *Slough House* series, based on a department of MI-5 where failed spies are sent in the hope they'll give up and resign. An intriguing plot unfolds in this one. I liked it a lot.

[Review here.](#)

Fire With Fire by Candice Fox

Another great thriller from one of my favourite Australian authors. Set in Los Angeles, it features a couple desperate to find their missing daughter taking drastic action which splits the police force.

[Review here](#)

Exiles by Jane Harper

Exiles is the third of her novels centred around the protagonist Aaron Falk, who works for the Australian Federal Police as a forensic accountant. As in Jane Harper's other novels, the relationships between her characters are as important as the solution of the crime, and are very well drawn.

[Review here.](#)

Red Team Blues by Cory Doctorow

All the elements of a private detective story with a tense plot, but its focus is on technology; and the tools of the detective in this kind of book are laptops, mobile phones, networks and software.

[Review here.](#)

Real Tigers by Mick Herron

This is the third novel in the series of "Slough House" spy thrillers by Mick Herron, and it's a cracker. I found this book highly engaging, unputdownable, and I read my way through it in less than two days.

[Review here.](#)

THE MEGALOSCOPE

ISSUE #7 JUNE 2023

The Megaloscope is a fanzine from David R. Grigg, published for ANZAPA members and available to anyone else who is interested.

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Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the members of the Wurunderi Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park, Victoria, and I pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

Literary

The Dictionary of Lost Words by Pip Williams

Interesting fiction centred on a young girl growing up as the monumental Oxford Dictionary of the English Language was being compiled. A bit long, I thought, but it certainly has an interesting and very valid feminist take on words and language.

[Review here.](#)

Northanger Abbey by Jane Austen

Remarkably, I hadn't read this classic before. It's quite a lot of fun, even if the heroine is no Lizzy Bennet.

[Review here.](#)

Non-Fiction

Anaximander and the Nature of Science by Carlo Rovelli

Excellent piece of non-fiction writing about the Greek philosopher who made breakthroughs in scientific thinking 2,600 years ago.

[Review here.](#)



Hits and Misses

Best Book Read Since Last Issue

The Mountain in the Sea was definitely the favourite book I completed since last time. Really interesting take on the "first-contact" idea in SF, and very well written.

Next Best?

The Dictionary of Lost Words, I would say. I liked the way it cleverly uses existing history to point up how women have for so long remained "invisible" and disregarded.

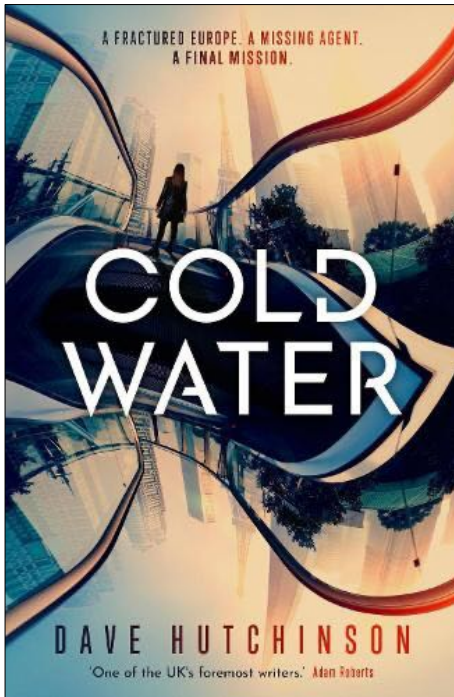
Most Fun to Read?

The Mick Herron books in the "Slough House" series, *Dead Lions* and *Real Tigers*. Each took me only a couple of days to read.

Most Disappointing?

I expected to enjoy *Cold Water* more than I did. I found it too confusing to work out what was going on, and was disappointed that it didn't do more with Hutchinson's "Fractured Europe" concept which was so fresh and engaging in *Europe in Autumn*, the first in this series.

Cold Water by Dave Hutchinson



THIS IS A STAND-ALONE ADDITION TO Hutchinson's "Fractured Europe" series, which I read and enjoyed a few years ago. The series comprises four books, in this order: *Europe in Autumn*, *Europe at Midnight*, *Europe in Winter* and *Europe at Dawn*, and they share two very interesting premises.

Firstly, the idea that in a few decades from now, following a deadly pandemic which shattered institutions, a largely united Europe has broken up, not only into individual nations, but further into smaller and smaller provinces and regions splitting away from their parent countries and declaring independence. From a Europe with no internal borders to one with hundreds of borders.

While perhaps improbable, you can certainly imagine this scenario playing out in some form in the future. Interestingly, the earlier books in the series came out well before both Brexit and COVID happened.

In such a scenario, being able to discreetly move valuable items and sometimes people from one place to another becomes a sought-after skill, and this gives rise to an organisation called *Les Coureurs des Bois* which means "The Runners of the Woods". What they do isn't necessarily illegal—but that depends on where you are standing. There's a definite flavour of the spy thriller in these books.

So that's the first premise, this fractured Europe.

The second premise, however, is an utterly fantastic one, and that's the idea that back in the early 1800s a family of map-makers started to draw highly detailed maps of an imaginary English county they called Ernshire and it *came into being* as a kind of pocket universe alongside our own. It's wacky, but I love a wacky idea if the author can carry it off well, which I think Hutchinson does.

The family weren't content to have created their own English county, but moved on to draw their magical maps of Europe, and by the time "our" version of Europe has splintered, there is a huge secret region lying beneath it or alongside it, ruled by descendants of the map-making family, still largely English and semi-rural. They call themselves "the Community".

By the time this novel, *Cold Water* opens, however, the existence of the Community is no longer secret and indeed some degree of trade goes on between the countries of "our" Europe and the Community, though the latter strictly controls access to its territory. There are only a few known crossing points.

Cold Water has a number of point of view characters, all of them female. We start with Carey Tews, a woman in her late 50s. She was once one of the *Courers des Bois* but left the organisation years ago. Now she's contacted and asked to investigate the death of a man called Maksim in a car accident in Eastern Poland. Long ago, Maksim recruited Carey into the *Courers* and also became her lover. The death seems straightforward: Maksim was driving at very high speed in a rural area, slammed into a tractor and was killed instantly. But of course there's more to it than that. Carey assembles a team of young people to help her investigate.

We are also introduced to Krista, who is a police inspector in Tallinn in Estonia, who is suspended from duty after being told that her father, who was also a senior police officer, has recently been accused of having covered up crimes and committed murders. Her father is now dead, and Krista cannot believe these accusations. Though forbidden from interfering in the investigation, she starts to make her own inquiries.

We also have Lenna, an out-of-work journalist who is recruited to help promote the cause of a Russian man who, it is claimed, was killed decades ago by police in Tallinn—among them Krista's father. Her publicity campaign causes great problems for the local authorities.

All of these stories are connected, of course, and eventually come together to a satisfying conclusion.

A criticism, though: it's often not clear which of these three women's stories we are following at a particular point in the book. There's too much scope for confusion (for this aging reader, anyway!). I'm sure that I would appreciate the book much more on a second read, but I'm not prepared to do that for quite a while. I am, however, now tempted to re-read the earlier books in the series.¹

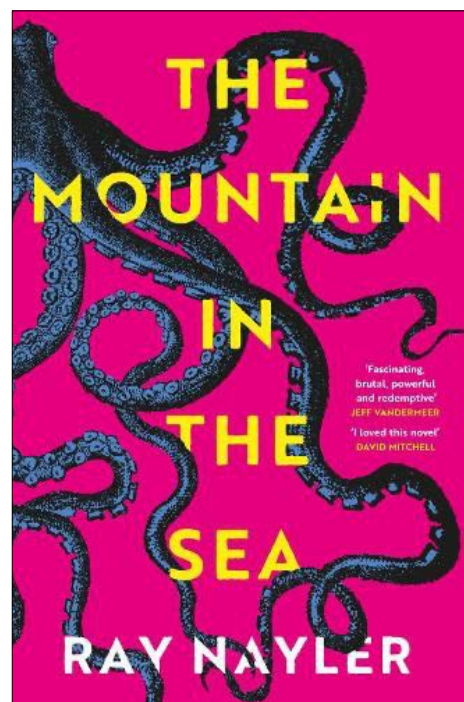
***The Mountain in the Sea* by Ray Nayler**

THIS IS AN IMPRESSIVE DEBUT NOVEL FROM this author.

It's a first contact novel, but with a definite twist. What if the alien species with which we need to communicate is already here, on Earth? Or rather, in the Ocean? That's the core premise of this book.

The novel begins some decades into the future, and much of it is set in the archipelago of Con Dao off the shore of Vietnam. The area was meant to be an oceanographic wildlife reserve, but because of local poverty and the corruption of officials has continued to be fished and exploited. Until it's taken over by a huge corporation called DIANIMA, established by Dr. Arnkatla Minervudóttir-Chan, who has dedicated her life to trying to create artificial minds. DIANIMA evacuates all of the local population from Con Dao and takes extraordinary measures to keep out those who wish to exploit the ocean around it. And establishes a research station there.

The book's main point-of-view character is Dr. Ha Nguyen, a scientist in her forties. The novel contains many quotes from Ha's book *How Oceans Think*, but we're introduced to her as a character when she's recruited by DIANIMA and airlifted to the research station on Con Dao. Here she meets two other characters who play a large role in the story: in fact much of the story is about the personal dynamics between these three women. The first person Ha meets is Altantsetseg, the station's Mongolian security officer: she is a powerful figure, who has fought in several wars and has the scars to prove it. The other character in the drama on the island is Evrim. Evrim is Minervudóttir-Chan's greatest creation, a genderless



¹ Amusingly, now that I look back at my review of the earlier *Fractured Europe* books, I see that I read the first three again as soon as I finished them because I was so confused about what had been going on!

android with apparently completely human consciousness and even greater intelligence. But such is the fear this raised in the popular mind that many countries forbade Evrim to enter their borders and passed laws against further such creations.

Ha's attempts to understand Evrim's thoughts and feelings are a key part of the book. There's a nice passage I'd like to quote:

In the lobby, Evrim sat alone, face lit by the glow of a terminal, surrounded by all the gear and tech Altantsetseg was constantly tinkering with. And Ha had a clear image of Pinocchio on the shelf, ranged among the inanimate dolls that were its ancestors, suspended between the worlds of the living and the inanimate, subject and object, struggling to become real.

Ha soon finds out why she has been recruited and taken to Con Dao: just offshore from the research station, deep in murky water, is the sunken wreck of a large ship, now completely taken over by sea life. Including a group of octopuses which are demonstrating unexpected behaviour, perhaps, just perhaps, intelligent behaviour. Ha is excited by the possibilities of communicating with a species utterly unlike ourselves. She and Evrim work together to try to make sense of what they are seeing, while Altantsetseg operates lethal firepower to destroy fishing vessels attempting to enter the protected zone.

There are dark forces at work, however. One of these recruits a Russian hacker to try to find a way into a complex network in order to take it over. We eventually learn that this "complex network" is in fact Evrim's mind.

We also follow the story of Eiko, who has been press-ganged to work as a slave on an AI-controlled fishing vessel named the *Sea Wolf*.² The intelligence controlling the vessel is locked behind steel plates. The human slaves have replaced the robots previously on board the vessel, simply because they are cheaper to replace if they die. The profit motive rules all.

Dr. Ha Nguyen knows that it is going to be almost impossible in the long run to protect the octopuses on Con Dao from the exploitation of such fishing vessels, even if she can prove that the octopuses have reached a level where they are building their own culture.

The story comes to a head when Dr. Minervudóttir-Chan herself arrives on the island and tells them that a hostile take-over of her company, DIANIMA, is under way, and she doesn't know if it can be stopped. Without DIANIMA's protection, it's all too likely that Con Dao will quickly be exploited and stripped bare, intelligent octopuses and all.

At the end, there's a nicely unexpected twist.

I liked this a lot. The relationships between the main characters are full of interest, and it's one of those books which really make you think about several related themes:

- what is it that makes us human?
- what does consciousness mean?
- can we create a true artificial intelligence, and what would its life be like?
- how could we communicate with a truly alien species physically completely unlike ourselves?

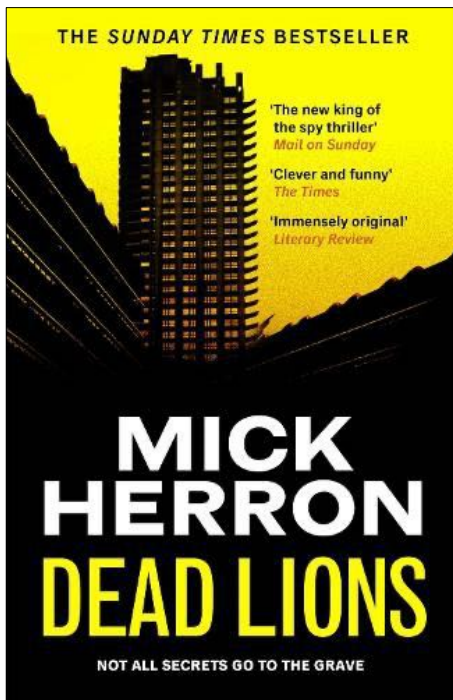
²Complete with a jokey sign on the AI's compartment reading "Wolf Larsen, Captain". This is a reference to a novel by Jack London. In London's novel, Larsen is an overbearing cruel master who treats his crew as though they were his slaves.

Definitely recommended. I nominated this, together with *Babel* and *Sea of Tranquility* for this year's Best Novel Hugo.

Perry Middlemiss and I had an extended discussion about the novel on our podcast, which you can [listen to here](#).

CRIME/THRILLER

Dead Lions by Mick Herron



THIS IS THE SECOND IN A SERIES of, I guess, spy thrillers by Mick Herron, based around the MI5 department where failed spies are sent in the hope that they will eventually get so bored and pissed off that they resign. It's loosely called "Slough House" and the people who work there are dubbed "slow horses". Slough House is run by the idiosyncratic, acerbic, foul-mouthed and generally disgusting Jackson Lamb, who is in his 60s.

The books are in the process of being turned into a very successful television series on Apple TV+, with Gary Oldman doing a brilliant job in the role of Jackson Lamb. There have been two seasons released so far, and the second season is based on this book, *Dead Lions*. But, as I found after reading the book, the TV show is only very loosely based on the book, and includes some what I thought were very confusing elements which aren't there in the book. I'm wondering if they brought forward some material from the third or later books in the series. Why they

did this I can't understand, because as I wrote at the time, I found the plot of the second season of the TV version quite difficult to follow. Matters are much simpler and easier to understand in the book. Which is not to say that the plot of the book is simple, only that it makes more sense than what I watched on the TV.

Anyway, let's get to the plot. Perry has already discussed the book previously in the podcast, so I'll try not to repeat too much of what he's already said.

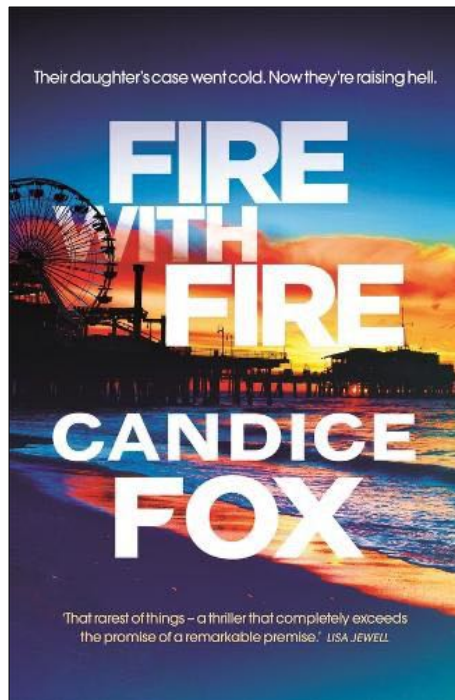
The triggering incident is the death of a long-since retired spy called Richard Bough, jokingly known to all as "Dickie Bow" (a British slang term for a bow tie). Dickie is found dead on a bus on the way to Oxford. Jackson Lamb thinks there's something suspicious about this and sets out to investigate. His staff, puzzled about what he's doing, get involved. Dickie, it seems, may be a link to a Russian spymaster from the Cold War era, a spymaster who may or may not have actually existed. This spymaster was reputed to have set up several "sleeper agents" in Britain, who have spent years pretending to be ordinary British citizens, waiting to be triggered.

A second thread (which of course eventually comes together with the first) is to do with two of Lamb's staff being seconded by an ambitious character called James Webb from Regent's Park, the main MI5 headquarters. They are to facilitate a meeting with a Russian oligarch called Arkady Pashkin, ostensibly to talk about an oil deal but really because Webb thinks he can recruit him as an agent. The job sounds straightforward, but of course things go badly wrong

A really interesting and to me quite unexpected plot develops through the book. Nothing is quite as it seems.

Look, I really enjoyed reading this, considerably more than I did watching the TV show, because as I've said, the story in the book just seems to make a lot more sense all round. I think I'll be reading the other books in the series without waiting for them to arrive as episodes of the TV series.

Fire With Fire by Candice Fox



CANDICE FOX IS PROBABLY MY FAVOURITE AUSTRALIAN crime writer. I like her novels which are set in Australia most of all, such as her debut trilogy *Hades/Eden/Fall*, but she's also been writing some terrific thrillers set in the United States, which are all very worth while reading.

Fire With Fire starts with the dramatic rescue by a young woman of a drowning man just off the coast of California. After she drags him ashore, she sees that he's very badly injured. Nevertheless he fends off treatment, manages to get hold of a phone and gasp out a cryptic one-word message before lapsing into unconsciousness.

The next scene is of an eager young woman, Lynette Lamb, who has just joined the Los Angeles Police Department after completing her training at the Police Academy. On her first day, she's shown her locker, and after changing into her uniform, she's taken up to see her boss. Who tells her that she's been responsible, albeit unknowingly, for the exposure of

a police officer who had been working undercover for several years with a gang of criminals. And she's fired on the spot. It turns out that the man saved from drowning at the start of the book was this officer, Charlie Hoskins, who managed to escape the criminals who were set to kill him but not before they had bashed and tortured him.

It's at this point that a drama unfolds at the police forensic laboratory, where a married couple, driven to desperation by the lack of police investigation into the disappearance of their young daughter two years ago, occupy the premises and take several hostages. They demand the police locate their daughter *that very day*, or they'll start to destroy the evidence stored at the laboratory, sample by sample.

This threat begins to open up deep rifts in the police force between the senior officers whose prime responsibility is to ensure the safety of the hostages, and the working police who see the critical evidence which will resolve the cases on which they've worked so hard being destroyed. The couple occupying the laboratory have somehow found out which case each sample is related to, and announce this information just before destroying that sample. The police chief finds herself having to fight mutiny in her ranks as sample after sample goes up in flames.

While all this is going on, Charlie Hoskins sets out to try to find out what happened to the couple's daughter, but of course the trail is now cold. To his astonishment, he finds that Lynette Lamb, the dismissed rookie police officer, has tracked him down and insists on helping him in his investigation. Their relationship during this long day, and the way they end up working effectively as a team, is very cleverly and convincingly handled.

The tension mounts throughout, made more intense because the criminal gang from which Hoskins has escaped are intent on finding him and killing him.

The ending here is certainly not one I saw coming, and there are a number of twists in the plot which are very well done.

Exiles by Jane Harper

JANE HARPER IS AN AUSTRALIAN CRIME WRITER who has written some excellent books, including her debut novel *The Dry* which was a best-seller and was made into a successful film starring Eric Bana.

Exiles is the third of her novels centred around the protagonist Aaron Falk, who works for the Australian Federal Police as a forensic accountant. I haven't read the second novel featuring Falk, *Force of Nature*, but nevertheless I didn't have any problem reading this one, and didn't feel that I'd missed too much of his story.

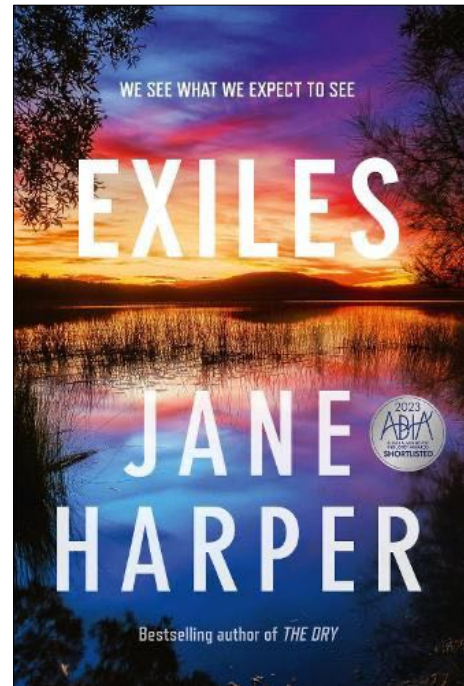
As this novel opens, it's the anniversary of the disappearance of a young mother, Kim Gillespie, from an annual food and wine festival in the town of Maralee in rural Victoria. She disappeared in early evening, leaving her six-week old baby Zoe in her pram, thoroughly wrapped up and protected, but alone. The baby's father, Rohan, had left his wife and child at the festival to go to dinner with his father at a local restaurant. Other than a gap of about six minutes after that, his movements were well documented by CCTV coverage.

After one year, nothing has been seen of Kim since, though one of her sneakers was found at the outlet of a nearby reservoir. The presumption is that she was suffering post-natal depression and killed herself.

Aaron Falk is involved because he is friends with a policeman, Greg Raco, and through him with the whole Raco family who live in Maralee and who operate a local vineyard. Kim was married for many years to Charlie Raco, and had a daughter Zara with him. Zara is now a teenager and consumed with a desire to find out what happened to her mother.

I found all these relationships, and the flash-backs to what happened a year ago quite confusing at the start of the novel, it took me a while to work out who is who and what is going on, but after a while I had figured it out. I was reading it as an ebook borrowed from the library, and as I've said before you sometimes need to quickly flip back and look at earlier parts of the book, which is easy to do with a printed book but can be hard with an ebook. What's more, the library e-reader app I was forced to use doesn't even have a search function, so it was tougher than usual, even making allowances for my aging brain.

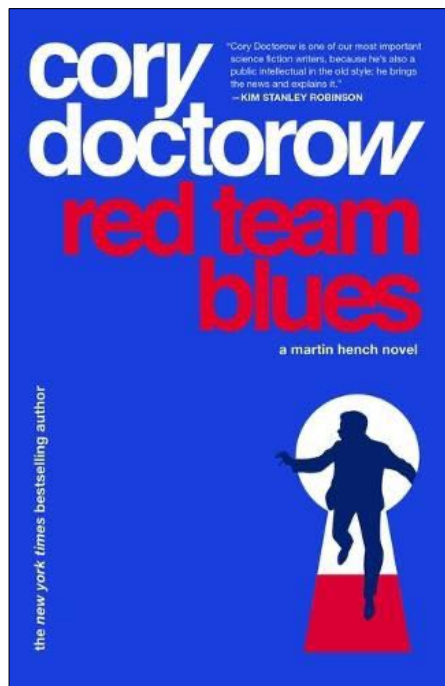
Anyway, back to the story. Falk and his friend, Greg Raco, are still trying to puzzle out Kim's movements on the night, and why she wasn't seen leaving the festival grounds and heading down to the reservoir. The only witness they have is a negative one, a teenage boy who was manning the eastern exit and who says he never saw her go by. Despite their patient investigations, the key to the mystery arrives quite suddenly, when Falk hears something which sets off flashing lights in his mind.



As in Jane Harper's other novels, the relationships between her characters are as important as the solution of the crime, and are very well drawn. I do have some nits to pick, not so much with the solution of Kim's disappearance, but with the secondary thread about the hit-and-run death of another man some years previously. One of those situations where after you put down the book you go "hang on a minute...". But that's a minor quibble. As a whole I liked the book a good deal.

Given the way it ends I don't imagine there'll be any more written in this series featuring Aaron Falk, but I'm sure we'll see more good crime novels from this author.

Red Team Blues by Cory Doctorow



CORY DOCTOROW IS A CANADIAN-BORN WRITER and blogger who in recent times has been writing articles exposing the way huge corporations are destroying civil society and our planet all in the name of profits.

I've only read a couple of his novels previously: *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, and *Little Brother*. The latter in particular picks up on his political views. He shows his commitment to his principles by releasing all of this work under a Creative Commons License, without DRM (Digital Rights Management), and in fact refuses to let audiobooks of his work be sold through Audible, because they insist on applying DRM to everything they publish.

I suppose you would describe *Red Team Blues*, his most recent novel, as a "techno-thriller". It has all the elements of a private detective story with a tense plot, but its focus is on technology and the tools of the detective in this kind of book are laptops, mobile phones, networks and software.

The protagonist is Martin Hench, a 67-year old forensic accountant and security consultant, who as the story opens has largely retired and spends his time travelling around in a bus converted into a luxury mobile home—he bought it off a rock star who was leaving the business. As a software security consultant, Hench is usually on the "red team": the group who try to break into systems to expose their vulnerabilities. The "blue team" plays defence and tries to harden their networks and systems against such attacks. The red team, Hench notes, always has the advantage, trying all sorts of different attacks, whereas the blue team only has to make one mistake and they have lost. This, of course, isn't really a game, and losing can lead to severe real-world consequences.

Hench is contacted by an old friend, Danny Lazer, who has been trying to set up a new cryptocurrency system (think Bitcoin) which doesn't eat up vast amounts of computing power and electricity (as does Bitcoin and the rest of such systems). Danny has illegally obtained some highly critical cryptographic "keys" which would allow him, among other things, to rewrite the cryptocurrency ledger, something which is meant to be impossible. The keys were on a laptop he had placed in what was meant to be a highly secure facility. The laptop had been modified so that no wireless or Internet connection was physically possible. And the laptop could only be accessed by someone possessing a unique hardware token.

Despite all these precautions, however, Danny's hardware token was stolen by a pickpocket and the laptop shortly afterwards disappeared from the supposedly secure facility. Together, these two items could give the bad guys terribly dangerous control of software systems worldwide.

Hench sets out to find those who stole the token and the laptop before they can put the stolen cryptographic keys to use. He leverages his long experience and knowledge of computer systems and it's not long before he thinks he knows who the thieves are and where they are hiding. But there are more than one group of bad guys trying for the prize, and gruesome things happen. Worse, Hench himself finds himself blamed for what has happened, and has to go on the run.

Throughout all of this, Hench relies a great deal on his friends and contacts, including two very smart women, who manage to pick him up and sort him out when things go badly wrong, which of course they do.

This was a real page-turner for me and I enjoyed it a lot, but I did feel a bit let down with the ending of book, which seems rather too tame and pat in comparison with some of the hazards Hench faces earlier on. I kept expecting a last-minute "oh, ho, you think the danger is over, but..." moment, but that didn't happen.

It certainly helps a great deal if you understand at least a little of the underlying technology behind the story. Otherwise I think you would definitely struggle, not to mention missing little jokes like the name of Hench's bus, *Unsalted Hash*.

As a computer nerd from way back myself, however, I lapped it up.

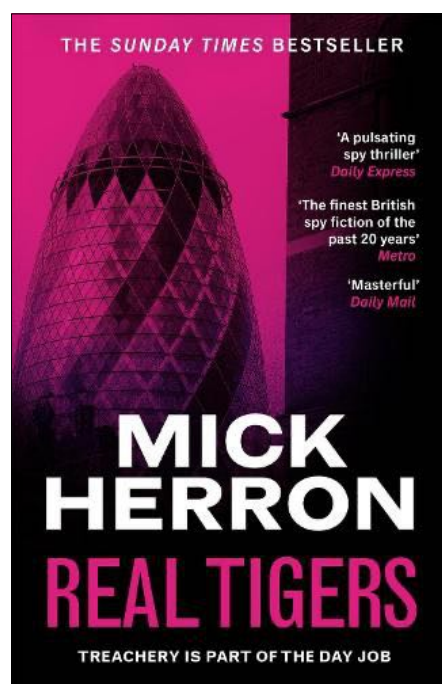
Real Tigers by Mick Herron

THIS IS THE THIRD NOVEL IN THE series of "Slough House" spy thrillers by Mick Herron, and it's a cracker.

The conceit of the series is the idea of a department of Britain's MI5 where failed agents are sent to do dreary, unimportant work in the hope that they'll eventually get so bored and annoyed that they will resign, saving the Government having to pay redundancy or face unfair dismissal charges. This department is dubbed "Slough House" and those who work there "slow horses".

Though that sounds like the scenario for a series of boring stories, Mick Herron makes it anything but. In this novel, the slow horses break into a full-on gallop as one of their number is kidnapped and held hostage, and political shenanigans and in-fighting lead to a series of violent confrontations. As always, there's a wonderful thread of very dry humour in the book, much of it centred around the head of Slough House, Jackson Lamb and the way he treats his staff. I also very much like the character Catherine Standish, and her struggles with alcoholism, or rather her struggles to prevent herself lapsing back into drinking.

I found this book highly engaging, unputdownable, and I read my way through it in less than two days.



Highly recommended. Now I'm going to hunt up the rest of the series, and if not quite binge-read them, certainly go through them pretty quickly.

LITERARY

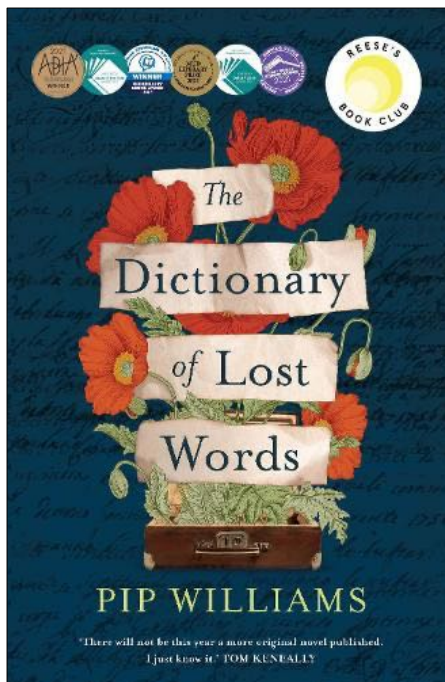
Northanger Abbey by Jane Austen

REMARKABLY, this is the first time I've read this Austen novel, though I've read and enjoyed all her other novels. Though it was published after her death, it was apparently one of her earliest pieces, and that does show a little. There are some tortuous sentences.

Still, it's quite amusing and entertaining, even if the heroine is no Lizzy Bennett. Austen has fun satirising the then-popular passion for Gothic novels set in gloomy ruined buildings and with sensational plots.

You can get a beautifully-formatted free ebook of this, and others of Jane Austen's works on [Standard Ebooks](#).

The Dictionary of Lost Words by Pip Williams



IN THIS DEBUT NOVEL, Pip Williams cleverly entwines a feminist story into the factual history of the compilation of the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, an enormous effort which took over four decades beginning in the late 1800s.

We're introduced to Esme Nicoll when she is a very young child. Her father Henry Nicoll is one of the scholars working in the Scriptorium, not much more than a large garden shed, located in the grounds of Dr. James Murray, the Editor of the Dictionary. Esme's mother died in giving birth to her, and so she is being raised only by her father, though with a lot of help from Dr. Murray's servants, particularly the maid called Lizzie, who plays an important part in the story as Esme's friend and guide.

Esme grows up literally at the feet of the Dictionary scholars in the Scriptorium, spending much of her time before she is old enough to go to school crawling about under the tables and desks where the scholars work. It's here that she picks up a slip which has fallen off a desk, a slip with the definition of the word "bondmaid". She's only just learning to read, so she has to spell it out letter by letter. Her father has told her that not every word sent in by volunteers will go into the great Dictionary, and so she thinks this is a discarded word and puts the slip into her pinny and takes it away.

This ties in cleverly with the fact that "bondmaid" was indeed accidentally omitted from the first edition of the Dictionary. Here is the author's fictional explanation of where that word went.

Over time, as she grows older, Esme keeps other discarded words, and starts to become interested in which words are being left out of the Dictionary, not by accident but by a conscious choice of the scholars, who are all men. Unsurprisingly to us, many of the words left out this way deal with women, women's bodies and

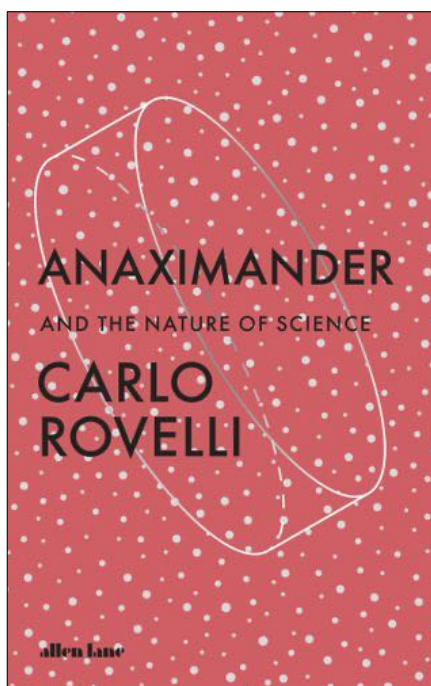
women's issues, and/or are words considered to be obscene. When she becomes old enough, Esme sets out to collect such words herself. She keeps her notes in an old wooden trunk, and scratches inside the lid the words: "The Dictionary of Lost Words".

Esme's development as a character is full of interest, as is her life story, which is not free from its tragedies. Her struggles against the prevalent and unthinking misogyny of the times is a constant theme of the book. These times also encompass the rise of the suffragette movement and the First World War, and the personal impact of these events on Esme is well handled. And of course the background of the compilation of the English Dictionary adds a great deal of fascination to the story.

I liked this a great deal, and I'm keen to get hold of William's subsequent novel, *The Bookbinder of Jericho*. As I understand it, that is related to this one, but not quite a sequel.

NON-FICTION

***Anaximander and the Nature of Science* by Carlo Rovelli**



ROVELLI IS AN EXCELLENT COMMUNICATOR OF COMPLEX scientific topics. His own research lies in the area of quantum gravity, a very difficult concept to get your head around. Here, though, he's setting aside these very up-to-date topics and heading back in time some 2,600- years to discuss the thinking of the Greek philosopher Anaximander.

I hadn't heard of Anaximander before this, but Rovelli discusses what little is known of him and his thinking. Much of what Anaximander wrote has been lost and we know of him mostly from what others wrote about him and his philosophy.

Nevertheless, from what we do know it's clear that Anaximander made a number of critical breakthroughs in thinking about the world and how it works. He was, for example, the first to set out that the Earth hangs in space with no support: the sky we see above us continues all around us, below the Earth as well as above it. Indeed, he seems to have understood that the very concepts of "up" and "down" are relative

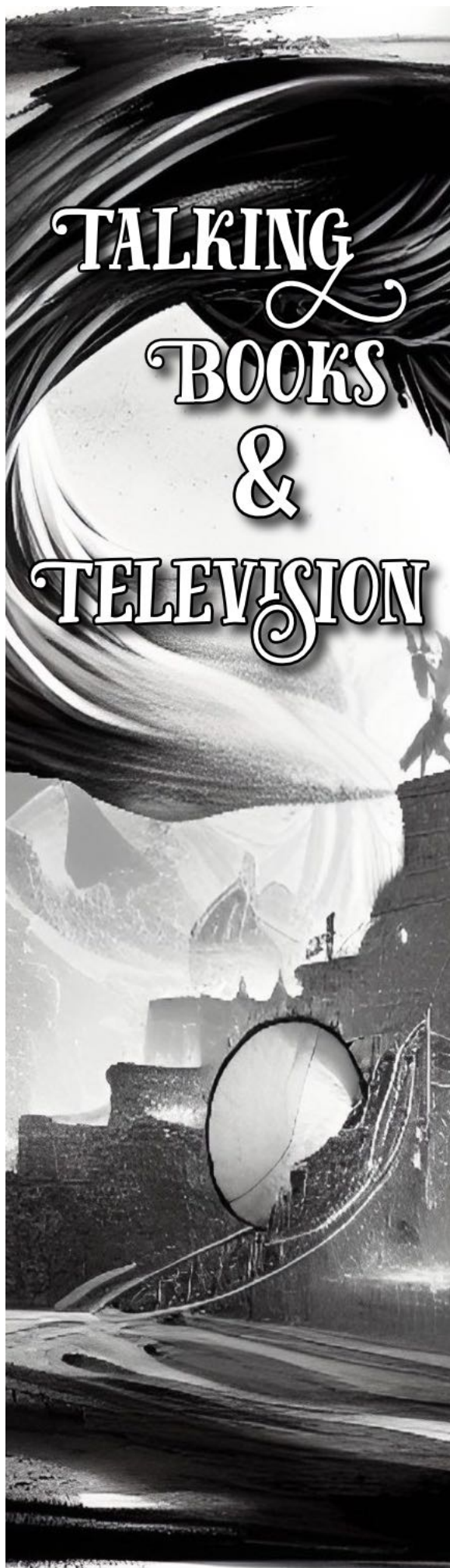
and not absolute.

He was also one of the first to try to describe how the world works without reference to the gods. Rain occurs because water evaporates from the oceans into the clouds and is then falls on the land. The god Poseidon isn't involved. Nor are thunder and lightning caused by the god Zeus being in a bad temper.

Anaximander, too, was unusual in that while praising his mentor Thales, was open in pointing out his master's mistakes.

Rovelli uses all of this to investigate what we mean by science and why it's the very uncertainty of science, its acceptance of endless doubt, that is its strength.

All in all, a really interesting book, well worth reading.



THIS IS THE TRANSCRIPT OF A discussion Perry Middlemiss and myself had on a recent episode of our podcast, discussing the recent television series *Life After Life* and the novel on which it's based, written by Kate Atkinson.

DAVID:

This is going to be interesting, actually, because we're going to talk both about a television series and the novel on which it's based. And this started off with Perry letting me know that there was a BBC television series of *Life After Life*, based on the novel by Kate Atkinson.³

So he's watched that and I watched that. And then each of us read the book. But I had read the book previously. I read the book when it first came out in 2014. That's because I'm a big, big fan of that particular writer. And basically everything that she puts out, I usually buy a copy and read pretty well straight away. So that's what I did. But it was very interesting to go back and re-read it.

So because we're talking about both the TV and the book, I thought what I'd do is simply start with a short summary of the concept, if you like, and the basic plot. And then we can sort of break that down into the TV series and the book. All right? And the TV series, I should say, follows the book pretty closely, leaves out things, of course, it's hard to get everything in, but it's pretty close to the book. So the basic story.

The story has a fascinating premise. And that's that the protagonist, Ursula Todd⁴, lives her life over and over again. Each time she dies, she's reborn as a baby at the exact same date and time in 1910. So Ursula

³ *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson (novel) [Buy it at Readings](#). *Life After Life* (TV): Available on BritBox and Fetch streaming services.

⁴ I'm sure it's no coincidence that 'Tod' is the German for death, and also that it's Old English for 'fox'.

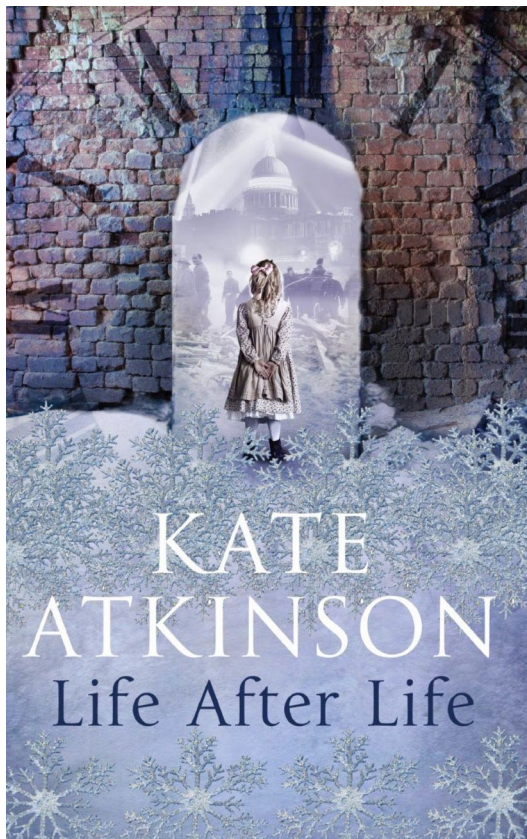
dies many times—I think I counted it in the book at least 15, 16, maybe more times—during the book. She dies many times during the book for many different reasons.

When she's reborn, she doesn't remember her previous life. But she does have vague premonitions and feelings which allow her sometimes to avoid whatever went wrong in her previous life and led to her death. But these feelings of having been here before slowly grow stronger and more definite through the course of the book.

And we follow Ursula episodically through her many lives through the first half of the 20th century, with a major focus on the Second World War, and in particular the London Blitz. We also get a deep insight into the lives of a middle-class family between the two world wars.

So that's the basic background concept.

Perry, do you want to talk perhaps about what you felt about the TV series? You hadn't read the book before, because this was your first exposure to the concept.



PERRY:

Well, the first exposure to this *particular* iteration of the concept, and we'll talk about that in a little bit.

Interesting similarities. Yes, I actually watched the TV series before I read the book. And I enjoyed the television adaptation quite a lot until the end. And this is my major problem with this particular iteration of this particular sub-genre.

So how about I basically talk a little bit about the sub-genre and then I'll go back because if I talk about what my problems are, you won't know what it's like in context. So I had a little bit of a look around to get a few definitions. Now, I should point out that this particular novel fits into what was, could be loosely referred to as a sub-genre of science fiction, although, and I will explain why later on, I don't believe this is a science fiction novel at all. I think this is just a literary novel that uses a science fiction meme to make a point and to try to use it as a frame.

So anyway, the sub-genre we're talking about here is the time loop sub-genre of science fiction. Now, Wikipedia defines a time loop or temporal loop as a plot device in fiction whereby characters re-experience a span of time which is repeated, sometimes more than



once, with some hope of breaking out of the cycle of repetition—important point there, which I’ll come to—The term time loop is sometimes used to refer to a causal loop. However, the causal loops are unchanging and self-generating, whereas time loops are constantly resetting. When a certain condition is met, such as a death of a character or a clock reaching a certain time, the loop starts again, possibly with one or more characters retaining the memories from the previous loop.

Now, they say possibly retaining the memories because it doesn’t necessarily have to happen, but there has to be some point in the looping and going back and restarting again. And in general, you can pretty much say that there is some retention of either direct memories or feelings or emotions from one iteration to another.

That’s certainly what happens here in *Life After Life*, where our main character, Ursula Todd, who is the one that is being consistently reborn, has, well, she suffers from what some people in the novel might describe as a sort of an overblown sense of *deja vu*. In fact, she does actually get sent to a psychiatrist to actually have a bit of a chat about this. And he doesn’t seem to be terribly fussed about this at all.

DAVID:

Yeah, I love that character.

PERRY:

He’s very good. He’s very, very sanguine about the whole thing. Well, yeah, maybe your brain’s just basically working that way.

DAVID:

Or maybe you *have* been here before.

PERRY:

Maybe you have. Who could tell? And if you were, how could I, how could I dissuade you from it? And I mean, how can I prove that you haven’t? And he’s really quiet, he’s really quite good about it.

And he’s one of the, the sane characters that sits in this, because the first time in, especially when I was watching it on the television series, I thought, oh, she’s off to this shrink. The guy’s really going to get stuck into it. And he’s wonderful. It’s just really helpful to her. And she really appreciates the work that he does with her over the years.

Now, okay, so she has these senses that she has been in places before, and feels as though things might be best if, if they are changed.

But anyway, let’s have a talk about a couple of other stories and books and a film that some people might have heard of, which actually fit also into this sub-genre.

And the first one I’ll talk about just briefly is a story called “12.01” by Richard Lupov from 1973. This is a short story in which an executive in New York finds himself reliving the same life, same hour of his life over and over again from, from 12.01pm to 1pm in the afternoon. And as soon as it hits 1pm, bang, he goes back again. But he remembers everything that happened in the previous time, but nobody else does. And he just keeps on rolling through. So that’s sort of a very thin time slice of reliving the first one. He was very annoyed, Richard Lupov, when the film *Groundhog Day* came out, the one with Bill Murray, where Bill Murray plays this...

DAVID:

Obnoxious.

PERRY:

...obnoxious, obnoxious is the word I'm looking for, reporter who's a television weather reporter who's out somewhere or other wherever they have that Groundhog Day in the US, where they bring out the groundhog. And if it sees its shadow, then everything's going to be fine. And if it doesn't, they've got another six weeks of winter. And he's stuck in this one day continually. He wakes up the next morning, and it's the same song playing on the radio. And he goes through the whole thing again. He's the only one that remembers anything about what happens. And he doesn't know how to get out of this loop. And basically the film really revolves around him trying to work out how to get out of it.



Now the other big one, that another book that utilises a very similar theme is that of *Replay* by Ken Grimwood.⁵ This won a World Fantasy Award back in the 1980s, and concerns main character of Jeff Winston, who dies of a heart attack in 1988. And wakes up back in 1963 as an 18 year old, and then he lives his life again, and he dies of a heart attack in 1988, and then he's reborn. But the next time that he's reborn, he's reborn just a little bit later in 1963. And as he goes through his iterations, the difference in time between when he was born on one iteration and the next starts to decrease, it goes to days and then weeks, and then months, and then years, and then decades, until he gets all the way right through, until he's just reborn just before he dies. And this time he survives his heart attack. And then after that his replays stop. But in this particular book, he finds other people that are also in the same position, that are also doing exactly the same, where they are reliving lives all the way right through. And he's able to

determine this because he comes, while he's living his life, he comes across, or a major motion picture is released, which he had never heard of before. And so he's able to track down the person that created this major motion picture, who has, they have hired Steven Spielberg to direct, and George Lucas to write the screenplay. Both of them just out of college and nobody had ever heard of them before. And the thing just goes absolutely gangbusters and is bigger than, you know, all the big blockbusters you can think of. So that's why he is able to determine that there's somebody else out there that has, is going through the same process as he is. And they do meet at least one other person in that particular novel.

Now we've also, you and I, David, read *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North,⁶ which uses a similar process where... I must admit, I can't quite remember exactly how the looping works in that. Do you remember?

DAVID:

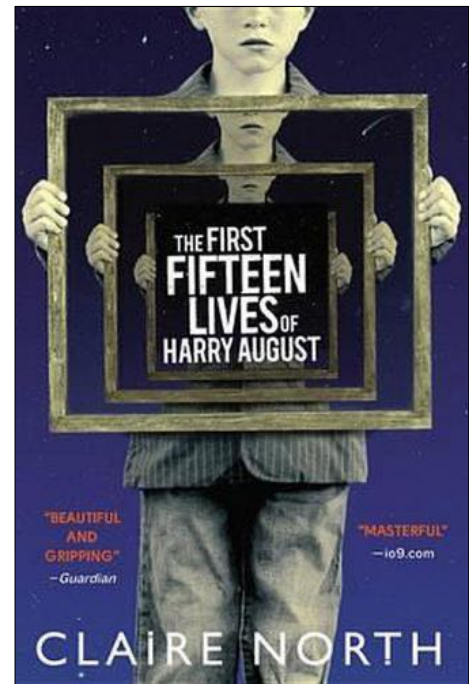
Yeah, I do. They die. It's not just the lead character Harry August, we discover eventually, but Harry August dies and he's back again as a baby. But as he reaches

⁵ *Replay* by Ken Grimwood [Buy it at Readings](#).

⁶ *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August* by Claire North [Buy it at Readings](#).

the age of being a toddler, he starts to remember his previous life. And his parents think he's gone crazy and they put him in an asylum for kids and he commits suicide and then he's back again. But now he starts to realise what's happening. And he always, once he's gotten to the age of four or five, he has a perfectly clear memory of what happened before. And he discovers that there are other people around in the world who do the same thing. What's do they call them? Ouroubans, basically from *The Worm Ouroboros*,⁷ which comes up in *Life After Life*.

So he has a perfect memory of each life and he uses that fact as a tool to defeat an evil guy who's trying to bring down the universe kind of thing. But he has a very clear perception, whereas in *Life After Life*, she only has the barest slight concept of the previous things, but sometimes enough to let her make changes in her current life, which we can talk about in detail later if you like. But yeah, so there are lots of similarities, but this is a different kind of novel as you say.



PERRY:

So basically, there are different ways of going about dealing with the time loop arrangement. But a lot of it carries on with, as we were just saying, about the idea that the main character retains some sort of memory or feeling from a previous loop, from a previous iteration. And certainly Ursula does that. I thought the fact that it was pointed out to the reader or viewer was much more obvious in the TV adaptation than in the novel. The TV adaptation actually has a voiceover and narration. And sometimes you are going to get some information from that. That is gleaned from the novel, but sometimes it is actually, I thought slightly expanded and I thought it actually worked a little bit better. There are times in the novel where you sort of think, surely she knows something here, but it's not really, the author's not really pushing that part of it terribly much.

There's one occasion in particular, the one that my wife and I enjoyed quite a lot, was the fact that in one of, well, third or fourth iteration through, Ursula dies of the Spanish flu, which she contracts when she's about eight. And she's able to determine that what happens is that, well, what does happen, although she doesn't remember the exact detail, is that the Irish maid in the household goes with her boyfriend down to London to see the crowds and see the end of the war and comes back with the Spanish flu, passes it on to the whole of the family. And Ursula and her younger brother, Teddy, end up dying.

Now Ursula gets the feeling that something is going wrong. She's got this feeling of a sense of dread about something going to be happening around about the time that Bridget in the next cycle says that she wants to go down to London and Ursula tries whatever she can to try and stop her from doing so. And in the end, it gets to the point where, she pushes her down the stairs and sort of makes it so that she can't actually walk very well and ends up not being able to go to London. And therefore, doesn't bring the flu back. But she doesn't really know why she's doing it other than she thinks this is the only way that she can avoid

⁷ *The Worm Ouroboros* [Wikipedia](#).

something really bad happening, but she doesn't actually know.

DAVID:

I thought that was all very clever there.

PERRY:

So did I. So did I. But in the book, I think there's an extra thing where she figures out another way of doing it, which is...

DAVID:

Which is later on.

PERRY:

Which is much later on in the book. And she tries something slightly different later on because I think she has the feeling of dread about being getting into trouble from her parents because it's not the done thing to go pushing the.

DAVID:

Really, you're an 8 year old. Pushing the maid down the stairs. Trying to kill the maid.

PERRY:

Pushing the maid down the stairs and not being able to say to say why you did it. Yeah, that's right. So that's a bit of a problem.

But the major problem that I had with the particular book is that if you take those other stories, *Groundhog Day*, *Replay*, there's an ending to it. You get to the point where in *Groundhog Day* in particular, this is the one that most people would know, the Bill Murray character actually has to go through a process of learning to be more humane, more thinking of other people rather than thinking about himself all the time. Although he has to work this out as he goes. He just starts getting to that point of view. He starts helping people along the way, pushing people out of the way of cars when they were going to get run down or catching them after they've fallen out of trees or helping people across the street, all this sort of stuff. He starts getting to being more of a decent human being. And then at

Ursula (played by Thomasin McKenzie) in the TV series of Life After Life



the end, he snaps out of his looping and he wakes up one morning and the song's changed and he can move on with his life.

The difficulty I have with *Life after Life* is I don't think that is actually going to happen. And that's one of the reasons why I think that I can't see this as a science fiction novel even though it uses a major science fictional plot device, namely the time looping, as its framework. So it's not a science fiction novel because it only uses part of the whole framework and meme. It doesn't actually go through to the end and actually work out a way to resolve the whole problem.

DAVID:

Okay, now I'm going to tell you why you're completely wrong.

PERRY:

Good.

DAVID:

Because particularly in the book, it's not so clear in the TV series, I agree. But to me, it's absolutely clear in the book. And that's the death of Hitler is the key. It's the key to all of Ursula's many lives.

Because the book starts with a prologue set in the mid 1930s, well it's actually set in 1930 in Munich. And Ursula comes into a cafe and she sits down with a group of people who are having coffee and cake. This is in the book [version]. And now Ursula, although she's English, is obviously a well known acquaintance of these people. It's not evident at first who they are until she quietly pulls out a gun and shoots Adolf Hitler before being gunned down herself. So in a way, not even in a way, all the rest of the book is dedicated to leading us up to what occurs in the prologue.

And that's the ending point. It's the ending point in one way, not in another.

If you look at it, she's basically going through all these lives and she's slowly learning about what she is. She's discovering who she is and what she's there for in a way. And we get right to the very end, almost right to the very end of the book in this section called 'The End of the Beginning', which is a Winston Churchill phrase.⁸ And in that section, she's actually gone crazy and she's been put into a sanatorium. But she finally understands, she kind of finally understands what she is and what's happening. And she takes control of it. She says to, and this is an interesting thing she says, she says to Dr. Kellett, who's come to visit her, this is the psychiatrist. [Here's the quote]:

'Time isn't circular,' she said to Dr Kellet. 'It's like a ... palimpsest.'

'Oh dear,' he said. 'That sounds very vexing.'

And memories are sometimes in the future.'

'You are an old soul,' he said. 'It can't be easy. But your life is still ahead of you. It must be lived.'

At that point, what happens is, it's actually more clear in the TV series, at that point she really understands what she is and what power she's got. She really, by this stage, is really remembering pretty well all her previous lives. And she knows what she can do with it. What she can do with it is to go to Germany, make friends with Eva Braun, which happens [in an earlier cycle] in the book, make friends

⁸ "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." Winston Churchill, Speech in London, November 10, 1942, about the victory over Rommel at El Alamein. (Side note from David: my father fought in that battle).

with Eva Braun, who's Hitler's mistress, and through that become an acquaintance of the group around Hitler to the point where she can be accepted, to the point where she can go and kill him with a gun. So that's the ending point.

But what you've got to realise is that as soon as she's killed Hitler, of course all of Hitler's bodyguards shoot the hell out of her and so she dies instantly. So she herself can't experience the timeline after Hitler dies because she's killed at that moment. And so she goes back again, but things have changed a bit differently.

That's the breaking out point. It's the point where she's really realised she remembers everything from her previous lives and knows what she can do with that information. And that's the breaking out point. And the fact that the book continues for a little after that is interesting in different ways which you can talk about. But that to me is the whole key to the book. So that is the breaking out point.

PERRY:

But it doesn't end there, does it?

DAVID:

It doesn't end there, but that's the kind of... She comes back again. She goes back and does it again. Not very much. There's only very little after that.

What she does, what does happen after that is she meets up with Teddy again. Teddy has survived. At this point her beloved brother Teddy, she thinks has died. But now in this new time loop, maybe she's broken out of the looping cycle, now Teddy actually survives the war.

PERRY:

Do you think that her aim is that she has to kill Hitler to ensure that Teddy survives?

DAVID:

That's what she's doing it for. Well, she's doing it for another reason too. Because I love this book. So I've gone into quite a bit of detail to look at it. Because what she says, she sits down in the cafe. And this part is actually only in the body though, not the prologue.

She sits down at the table. She's obviously a friend of the group. She's not a stranger. She's not seen as a threat. She sits down and quietly she says under her breath, excuse my German pronunciation: “*Wacht auf, es naht gen dem Tag.*”⁹ Which means, “Wake up, the day is coming.” And Hitler hears that, and he's startled and looks up. And then she pulls out the gun and she says to him, “*Führer, für Sie.*” Which means, “*Führer*” or “leader”, “*für Sie.*” Which means, “for her.” And who's the *her*? To me it's her daughter, Frieda, who she has in Germany [in an earlier cycle], who dies during the Allied bombing. That's the key to me, why she's done it. But it's also this love of Teddy too, who she wants to survive.

I don't know. I've gone off on a weird sort of tangent. But that is the key to me, I think. Now, the assassination of Hitler using a time machine, it's also a well-known trope of SF. But this is so much more subtle. The whole book leads up to this point.

⁹ This is the opening line of a poem by Hans Sach, *The Wittenburg Nightingale* about Martin Luther.

PERRY:

Well, actually, the idea of going back to the time machine and going back and killing Hitler is becoming pretty boring these days. Because it's been done so often, everywhere from *Doctor Who* on down.

DAVID:

But not like this.

PERRY:

No, not like this. I'll give you that. My point though is that I didn't get the feeling that anything had changed after she killed Hitler.

DAVID:

I do. But it is interesting at the end of the book, the fact that there is a life after that. I suppose the other thing which I find really interesting about it is this whole idea, as she says, it's not this perfect repetition every time. This concept of time being like a palimpsest,¹⁰ this manuscript which has been scrubbed out and written over again and over again. The whole concept of time in the book is really quite complex. Because each iteration of her life isn't exactly the same. And it's not exactly the same just because of her actions. There are other differences. Like Dr. Kellett in one of her cycles, Dr. Kellett has a son who's killed in the war. In another cycle, he doesn't have a son. In one cycle, her aunt Izzy, for Isabelle I suppose, Izzy has a child, but the child is left in Germany and adopted in Germany. In another iteration, he's adopted by the [Todd] family. So there's this fluidity of time in the whole thing which I really like.

And it's not just the repetitions that she's doing and making changes. But there are all these other subtle shifts. It's very fluid.

PERRY:

The very first thing that you get on the very first page [after the prologue] is that in 1910, Ursula is born. She's born in 1910 and she dies in childbirth because the umbilical cord is wrapped around her neck. And neither Bridget, who's about 14, pretty ditzy and doesn't really know what to do, nor the mother are terribly sure what they should be doing or are unaware of what the impact is. The doctor isn't there. The midwife hasn't made it. Later on, you get an iteration where the doctor actually does make it through the snow. And then later on, you get another iteration where he doesn't. But the mother and Bridget find a pair of scissors and cut the cord and make sure that that's all okay. So it's all gets to the end.

DAVID:

And Sylvie, the mother is actually prepared for that too. That's interesting too. The fact that maybe Sylvie has some sense of what's going on.

PERRY:

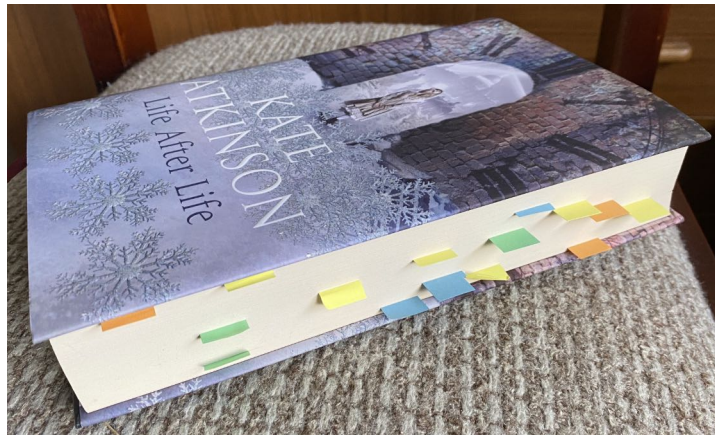
Yeah, I think that's probably stretching it a bit, but maybe. But you know, I thought it was an interesting concept. I thought it was handled well, I liked it. I thought the book went on a bit too much though because it goes, it's over 500 pages. The TV series is four one hour episodes, isn't it? Something like that. So

¹⁰ Wikipedia: "a palimpsest is a manuscript page, either from a scroll or a book, from which the text has been scraped or washed off so that the page can be reused for another document." Obviously Ursula is comparing the idea of her overlapping lives with being able to glimpse partially erased previous writings through the writing on top of a palimpsest.

about 240, 250 minutes somewhere around there. And so if you take one page per, one page of a screenplay per minute on the screen, you're talking about a 250 page screenplay, which probably comes in at about 350, 400 pages. So I thought the TV series was actually better than the novel. I don't know, you're going to hate me for this. But I do because I think it actually, it got rid of a fair bit of the stuff that was there that just seemed to be self indulgent to me in with the author. Now, I can understand if you were going back through it, the book over and over, you would probably pick up a fair bit. And this is another thing that I have to bring up about this. I have a feeling that my thoughts about reading the book were impacted by the fact that I was reading this rather complicated structured book as an e-reader and not on paper. The thing about this particular thing, the thing about this particular novel is you really do want to be able to go back and go, hang on a minute, flip, flip, where are we again? Oh yeah, okay. How does this fit in with the novel and sort of work your way right through? And yes, I can see what you're holding up...

DAVID:

This is my copy of the book with all my Post-It notes and little bookmark things all the way right through it.



PERRY:

And so you need to be able to sort of follow the tracks going through by going back and having a bit of a look. Now, where are we again? Because it does jump around. It will jump. You will start an iteration back at the birth or you might start it when she's just been saved from a drowning incident, which happens when she's about four or five, something like that, something like that with her sister, Pamela. She drowns in one iteration and then basically is saved in another one. And sometimes she'll die and the next thing that you know of the next iteration is basically in the 1930s, where she is sort of trying to decide whether she's going to go and study in Germany, where she does [go] and where she meets a future husband, has a child. He joins the Nazi party, joins the war, gets killed in the war and she's in Berlin when it's absolutely bombed into obliteration and then [inaudible]. And then she finds that the only thing left for her, because she's worried about the fact that the Russians are coming in from the east and that she and her daughter are basically going to get raped and murdered, that she commits suicide, a murder-suicide of herself and the daughter. So there's all of that and then it will jump back to somewhere in the middle.

So it's not consistent about where it starts, although you probably get four, five versions of the birth. The TV series does jump back early on in the first couple of the deaths back to the birth again and you get different versions of that and then carries on from there, but it will jump a number of years because there's no point going through all of that information again because that would be really tediously boring. And I thought they handled that pretty well in the TV series.

DAVID:

I thought they handled it very well. I liked that little thing of snow coming down each time she dies. She sees snow start to fall.

PERRY:

The blackness starts to fall, darkness falls, and then the snow starts coming down.

DAVID:

But in the TV series it's the little bit of snow that you realise something is going on.

PERRY:

Even though it might be a sunny day, suddenly you see the snow starts to fall and you think, "Oh, she's dying." So you get the idea. I thought it was handled extremely well. I reckon it's probably about as good as TV adaptations you can make of this...

DAVID:

I reckon so.

PERRY:

...because it's a fairly complicated structure. And I would say that although people may have seen *Groundhog Day*, it's not the same. In a lot of people's eyes who haven't read any more using this particular sub-genre, they're only going to have seen *Groundhog Day* because that was just one day going around and it was a comedy. They may not necessarily have picked up on what it was that was going on. So the makers of this particular TV adaptation were having to think of this as being going out fresh into the world where most of the viewers were not familiar with the concept. And I thought they handled it very well in that regard and made sure that you figured out what was going on pretty quickly.

And look, I go with the idea about, "Okay, so what does my wife know about this?" She's not a big reader of science fiction. She has definitely seen *Groundhog Day*. I suggested that we watch this because you and I were going to be watching it. And she really greatly enjoyed it. She thought it was absolutely wonderful.

DAVID:

And my wife too.

PERRY:

She enjoyed it. Didn't have any problem with the concepts whatsoever. So obviously the TV adaptation handled that very well and explained it all as best they possibly could. And I thought they did very well.

DAVID:

The other thing I thought they did very well was because you're going back and back and back again, they had to deal with Ursula as a child at different ages. And so there's a number of child actors in it. And I thought that the casting there was very good because, I mean, in a series, if you're watching a movie which is a biopic, and you have a young character cast as the young central character, and then you move on and then you leave that behind and you're into the adult character, you never really have to compare the two together. Whereas in this, you're

constantly having to, in a way, to compare the adult Ursula with the younger Ursula. And I thought the casting was done very well because that seemed to me to be seamless. I never had any doubts that it was the same character.

PERRY:

I felt the same. I thought that was done very well. Because you're going to be jumping back from a time when Ursula is late 20s, early 30s, all the way back to when she's three or four or five. And yes, I agree. I didn't get any sense of dislocation when I was jumping back. "Oh, God, this person looks nothing like them. It's nothing like them." So I'm just assuming that what they did was the script was all completed. And the filming must have been done. We're just going to do this scene and this scene and this scene and this scene and use the kids continuously for the whole lot and then gradually work your way through and do all the rest. And so that takes a fair bit of shuffling in terms of your production and also your scripting and your editing later on. And it worked. It worked very, very well.

I would heartily recommend that people see the TV adaptation. I was a bit disappointed in the novel because I didn't think it rounded things off the way that I would have liked it to have done. I think on the basis, David, as I said earlier, that I think that what it is that it sets up a premise that seems to have a solution which is going to have an ending. And to me, I didn't feel it so that, yes, I'll take your point that there's the solution that she finds that her major aim in all of these iterations is that she has to continually go and kill Hitler every time, knowing that it's going to kill her because there's no way to get close to him, even by the time that, by this time, by the time that she is old enough to be able to be in Germany on her own and be able to be wandering around, he has then got to the point where he has enough influence over people around him that he has a large number of bodyguards. So she can't go back and sort of kill him when he's just out of the First World War, for example, because he's only eight or ten and wouldn't be capable of it and wouldn't have been allowed to go there on her own anyway. So she knows that she is going to die every time she kills Hitler, but it's just like another loop going round and round.

DAVID:

Do you think she kills him more than once?

PERRY:

I think she does kill him more than once.

DAVID:

I don't know. That's interesting, isn't it? Does she kill him more than once? Okay, interesting. It's certainly one of those books which leaves you thinking very deeply.

PERRY:

I think so.

DAVID:

That's one of the reasons I like it.

PERRY:

Well, I think, but you're right, it is a literary book. It's not a genre book by any means. It's definitely a literary book. It's a literary novel that utilises a science fiction or meme, similar sort of things like *The Time Traveler's Wife*,¹¹ that is a literary novel that uses the science fiction meme or the idea of time travel. Time travel has gone out of the science fiction genre now. It's part of the general culture. And I'm thinking that if there was another one of these fairly shortly, then this would have gone as well.

So if they actually get the point where they make *Replay*, you know, make a film adaptation of it... I was reading that there was an attempt to make it, but it fell over. I think it probably deserves to be done, I mean, because of course, the concept is interesting enough. And they haven't, filmmakers have not said, oh, well, somebody's made a time travel movie, we can't make one for five or ten years. It's just a concept that they can wrap a story frame around. So well, a story around that particular framework. And why not use it?

DAVID:

Now, you thought the novel was fairly long.

PERRY:

Yes.

DAVID:

So you would maybe, maybe not be interested in the fact that there is a sequel.

PERRY:

Oh, okay. Oh, dear.

DAVID:

Called *A God in Ruins*, which is about Teddy's life.¹² It's all based around Teddy's life. But it's the Todd family again, Fox Corner, where they live, and his experiences during the war. But this one doesn't have the concept of the multiple parallel lives. It's just a straight telling of Teddy's life. But well worth reading too. All of her books are well worth reading.

PERRY:

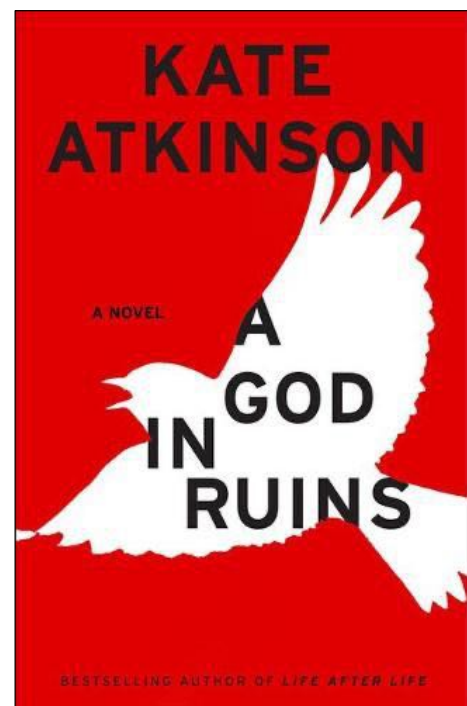
All right. I'll say you aren't going to tell me what happens in this one.

DAVID:

So in terms of the end, he survives the war. He dies as an old man.

PERRY:

Oh, okay. So this is the iteration where he survives the war.



¹¹ *The Time Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger [Buy it at Readings](#).

¹² *A God in Ruins* by Kate Atkinson [Buy it at Readings](#)

DAVID:

He dies as an old man. It's good. But I'm a big, big fan of all her books. I've read all of her novels. The only thing I haven't read of hers is there's a collection of short stories, which I must get hold of and read because I'm reading all the stuff that she wrote.

PERRY:

Yes. Well, my wife recently, this year, become a fan of the Jackson Brodie crime series, which you have mentioned previously.

DAVID:

Yeah. And they're not straight crime either. They're sort of on the edge of the genre, literary fiction, I guess.

PERRY:

All right. All right. Good.

DAVID:

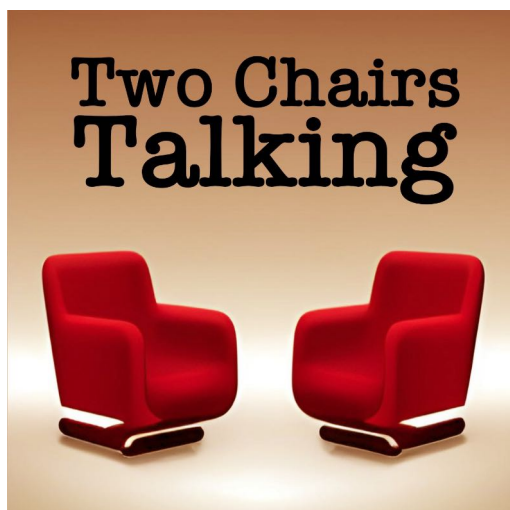
Well, I think we've done that one to death, don't you think?

PERRY:

I think so. Look, it certainly is an interesting idea. It's an interesting concept.

And it's also interesting to see how people from outside our sort of field, if you like, are able to take some of these interesting concepts and be able to put their own slight little twist on it, because there's enough twists and changes in what Atkinson does here to be able to make this certainly worthwhile and up there with the best uses of the concept that I've read so far. Just because I don't like the way that it ended is just my problem. Nobody else's. And that's fine.

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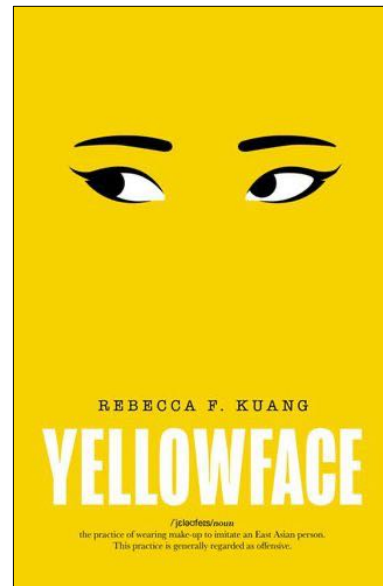


If you've enjoyed this interview transcript, you might like to listen regularly to Perry Middlemiss and myself discuss books, movies and TV in our podcast, *Two Chairs Talking*. It comes out every three weeks.

[Visit our website for more information.](#)



Yellowface by Rebecca F Kuang



Everything about R.F. Kuang’s novel “Yellowface” feels engineered to make readers uncomfortable. There’s the title, which is awkward to say out loud, and the cover, which features a garish racial stereotype — cartoonish slanted eyes imposed on a block of yellow.

Then there’s the story itself. In the opening chapters, a white author steals a manuscript from the home of a Chinese American novelist who has died in a bizarre accident, and plots to pass it off as her own. What follows is a twisty thriller and a scorching indictment of the publishing industry’s pervasive whiteness and racial blind spots.

If people in the literary world bristle at Kuang’s withering depiction of the book business — or cringe in recognition — well, that’s exactly the point, she said.

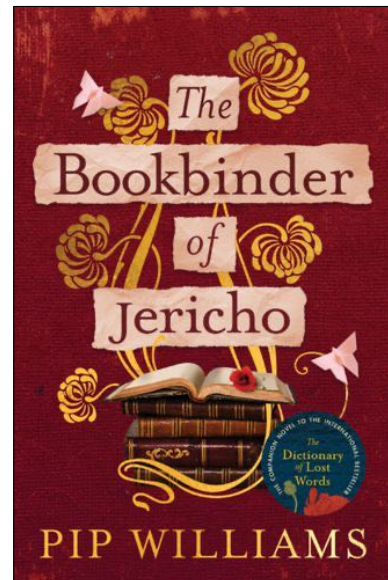
The above is an excerpt from an article by Alexandra Alter in the New York Times.

I really enjoyed this author’s *Babel*, or *The Necessity of Violence*. This new novel, though obviously very different in subject matter and style, will be a ‘must buy’ for me, I think.

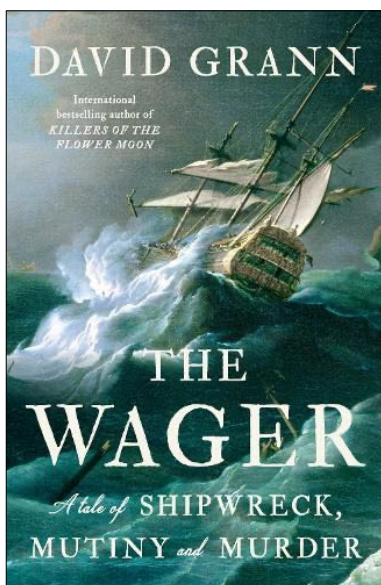
The Bookbinder of Jericho by Pip Williams

In this beautiful companion to the international bestseller *The Dictionary of Lost Words*, Pip Williams explores another little-known slice of history seen through women's eyes. Evocative, subversive and rich with unforgettable characters, *The Bookbinder of Jericho* is a story about knowledge who gets to make it, who gets to access it, and what is lost when it is withheld.

I enjoyed Pip Williams' *The Dictionary of Lost Words* and this follow-up certainly looks worth while following up.



The Wager by David Grann



On 28th January 1742, a ramshackle vessel of patched-together wood and cloth washed up on the coast of Brazil. Inside were thirty emaciated men, barely alive, and they had an extraordinary tale to tell. They were survivors of His Majesty's ship *The Wager*, a British vessel that had left England in 1740 on a secret mission during an imperial war with Spain.

This sounds like a really interesting non-fiction book, and I'm very interested in real history (historical fiction, not so much). I'll definitely try to track it down. Love the cover here, too. Great image and very good use of typography.

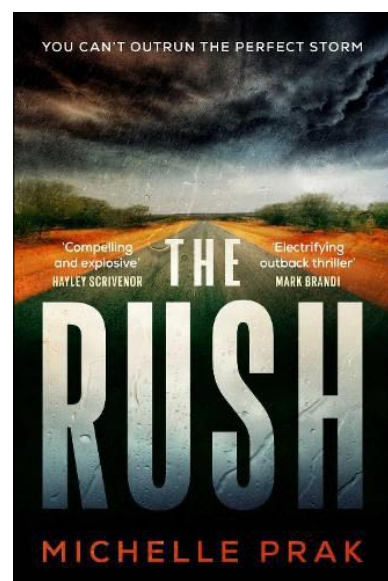
The Rush by Michelle Prak

Some threats are closer than they appear ...

The first drops start to fall when Quinn spies the body. With no reception and nothing but an empty road for miles, does she stop to help or keep driving to safety?...Chilling, tense and twisted, this compulsive thriller will send adrenaline coursing through your veins.

'An electrifying outback thriller that's unlike anything I've read.' Mark Brandi, author of *Wimmera*. 'Compelling and explosive: you won't be able to put this book down.' Hayley Scrivenor, author of *Dirt Town*

My gosh we have some great writers of crime and thrillers in Australia. I hadn't heard of this writer before, but this looks very good.



The Human Mind by Paul Bloom

Built from his award-winning 'Introduction to Psychology' course at Yale University, Paul Bloom's *Psyche* is the first complete guide to the science of mind. From the foundations of traditional theory - Sigmund Freud and B.F. Skinner - to more cognitive elements of psychological study - computational functions of the mind, child development, behaviour, language, perception, attention, and memory. This is a whirlwind tour of the field of psychology.

By the end of this book, you'll have a solid grounding in every major aspect of the science of psychology.

I've long been fascinated by books about the human mind: I'm a big fan of the writing of Oliver Sacks, for example. This one seems to cover a wider range, though, and might be well worth a read. I probably won't buy a copy though, just borrow it from the library, if they get it in.

The Human Mind



A Brief Tour of Everything We Know



Paul Bloom

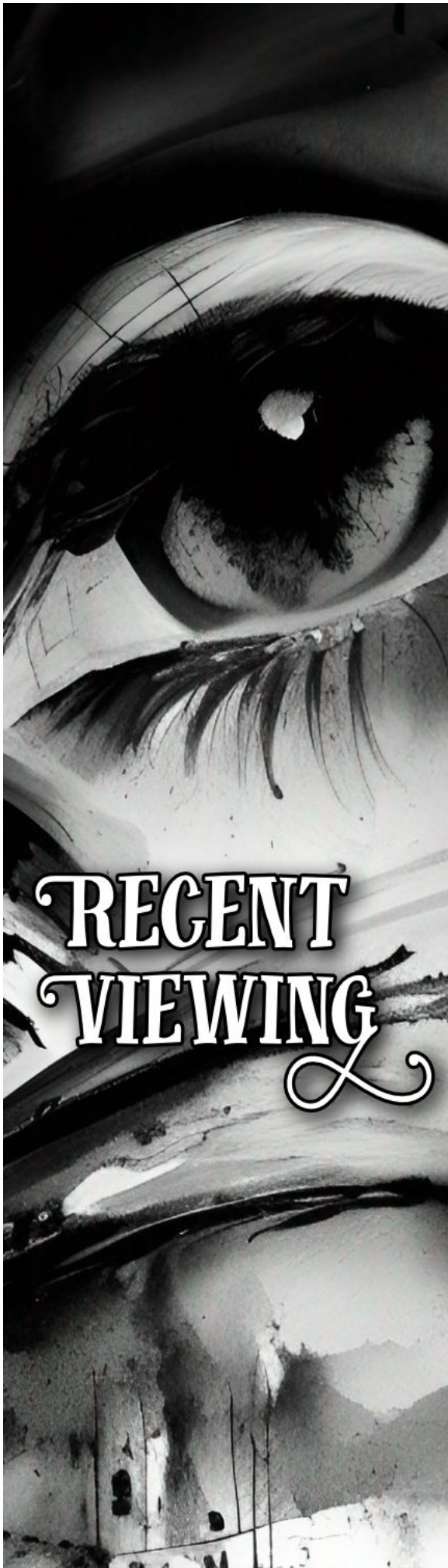


Don't forget to check out *Through the Biblioscope*, my fortnightly newsletter about my reading, as well as my monthly newsletter featuring my short fiction, *A Flash in the Pan*. Both are published on the Substack platform.

You can get both delivered to your email inbox, or view them in the Substack app.

[Through the Biblioscope](#)

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I'VE BEEN WATCHING AT LEAST A little more than in the previous few months, but still, I'm sure, considerably less than the average person does.

And even then, some of what we've watched has been a re-watch!

Jessica Jones - Season 1 (DVD)



This was a re-watch. I'd watched it a few years ago on Netflix (before Marvel was acquired by Disney and moved all their material to Disney+), but I saw that it was available on DVD at my library and so borrowed a copy.

A bit different from the usual super-hero feature. Jessica Jones (played by Krysten Ritter) doesn't wear a costume, and her only super-power is greater than average strength. In this first season she's up against Kilgrave (played by David Tennant), a terrifying villain who can control minds and make people do appalling things, including to themselves. If Kilgrave tells someone to chop off their arm with a chainsaw, they do it while they scream in agony.

Both the lead actors do a great job, as do all the supporting actors such as Rachel Taylor, who plays Jessica's friend Trish, Mike Colter, who plays her sometime-lover Luke Cage.

I enjoyed re-watching the season, but if I want to watch the other two seasons it looks as though I'll need to subscribe to Disney+.

The Great Race (Apple Store)



This 1965 film is a family favourite, so much so that phrases such as “Push the button, Max” are part of our family “language”. We’ve watched it many times, but for some reason the other night we felt like seeing it again. Surprisingly, I found that we didn’t own a DVD of it, and it didn’t seem to be available on any of the streaming services. But it was in Apple’s iTunes Store, available to purchase for the same price as you can rent it. So we bought a copy.

Way too long and often just silly, it’s still a very funny, highly entertaining film. Tony Curtis is perfect as The Great Leslie and Jack Lemmon eats up the role of the evil Professor Fate, with Peter Falk doing a brilliant job as his henchman. And of course Natalie Wood doing a great job as the feminist suffragette heroine, as they all set off to travel from New York to Paris by “auto-mo-bile” (as Leslie pronounces it).

Drive My Car (DVD)

This won the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film earlier this year. It’s based on a short story by Haruki Murakami (its title based on the Beatles song).

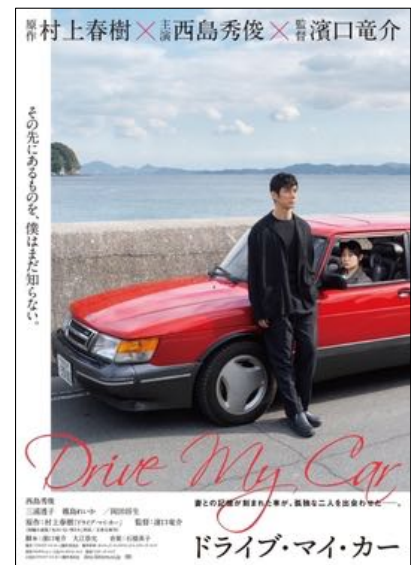
It’s quite long, nearly 3 hours in length, and fairly slow, as it tells the story of an actor and theatre director, Yūsuke Kafuku, whose wife dies suddenly. She was, he knew, regularly unfaithful to him, including with a young actor, Kōji Takatsuki, though the latter does not know that Kafuku knows this.

Two years later, Kafuku is still struggling to deal with his unexpressed grief when he is asked to direct a version of Chekov’s play *Uncle Vanya* at a festival in Hiroshima—strangely this production will feature actors speaking in several different languages including Japanese, Korean and even Korean Sign Language.

Among those auditioning is the young actor Kōji Takatsuki. Despite his knowledge that Takatsuki was his wife’s lover, Kafuku casts him in the play, to play the titular role of Uncle Vanya, not the role the young man wanted. The relationship between Kafuku and Takatsuki is thus a tense one, which goes through several stages.

But behind all of this is the fact that the festival has commissioned a young woman, Misaki Watari, to drive Kafuku everywhere he needs to go, in his own car, a red Saab. He’s apparently not allowed to drive himself because of an insurance issue. Kafuku thus spends a lot of time in the car with Misaki, and their interaction and changing relationship are at the heart of the film.

I enjoyed this, but think I would have understood what it is trying to do much better if I were more familiar with Chekov’s play *Uncle Vanya*, which is clearly intended to reflect some of the plot of the outer story of the film.





IT WOULD BE NICE IF MORE people wrote me letters/emails of comment, but I guess I can't complain since I so rarely write such letters myself. Anyway, here's what I have this time.

— — — — —

Mark Nelson (Email, 4 June 2023)

As you indicated that *Megaloscope* is a genzine that is distributed with ANZAPA, rather than an ANZAPA zine, I decided in turn that I'd email you my mailing comments rather than putting them in my own ANZAPA zine. I toyed with the idea of posting you a letter, but it turns out I am too lazy to walk to the post office. That might change when I return to work as the nearest post office then is on campus.

David:

No need to use "snail mail" to send me letters of comment, Mark!

Mark:

I enjoyed reading the transcript of your discussion with Perry Middlemiss on *Blade Runners*. I've watched *Blade Runner* many times, though I think only once on the big screen; it was shown at a Leeds Film Festival in the early 1990s.

I've only seen *Blade Runner 2049* once, albeit at the cinema. I must have been impressed as my one-word summary was 'Excellent'. Someday, I'll buy it on DVD. It has been on TV, but we chose not to watch it. We only have one TV screen and in the event that the vote is split I do not possess the casting vote.

About thirty years ago I bought a BFI book on *Blade Runner*. I don't remember much about the book, except that it was part of a series on well known movies. It wasn't very long, 112 pages if it's the same one listed on amazon, presumably it was aimed at students in Film Studies either at 'A' level or university. My copy is either in a box in the garage which will hopefully see the light after we move next year or my parents have thrown it away.

On a recent trip to our local library I found *Blade Runner 2049 and Philosophy*" (edited by Robin Bunce and Trip McCrossin). I didn't borrow it, there seemed little point having only seen the movie once. In addition, the title is off-putting. Do I want to read anything about philosophy? No!

David:

I am baffled by what philosophical maxims they were able to draw from the film. Sounds a bit like *The Tao of Pooh* though probably much less amusing!

Mark:

At the first World Diplomacy Convention, in 1988, I interviewed two visiting US fans. In those days, I recorded the interviews on a cassette tape. To transcribe the interviews I played the tape cassette, rewinding it every few seconds. This made for a slow process. A hardcopy was sent to the US for revision. Eventually, the corrections came back and I revised my copy. Your transcribing process is more efficient, but I note there is still a need for a human to produce the final copy.

David:

One certainly does need to check what the Whisper transcription has done. As I've said elsewhere, like ChatGPT it does have the tendency to occasionally make things up. I've found by far the best way to work with it is to read through the transcription while listening to the recording. That's fairly fast because Whisper is mostly correct. I also need to identify who is speaking: Whisper doesn't do that.

Mark:

Three books that had a profound impact on me as a teenager, and which I would have listed then as three of my favourites, are: Robert Heinlein's *Strange in a Strange Land* (read when I was 14), Zola's *Germinal* (my birthday present for myself when I was 16), and Robert Tressell's *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (a birthday present from my parents when I was 12 or 13). I'm sure that rereading the Heinlein is a bad idea. I'm not sure that I have either the enthusiasm or energy to re-read the others.

The year that I retire I want to re-read *Middlemarch*, perhaps I'll revisit the Zola and Tressell some time afterwards. I don't think any book that I've read since my teenage years has made as large an impression on me as books did then. But then, in the years that have passed I have acquired both more life experience and more literary experience. The days of having strong opinions on favourite books have long gone. Yes, I really want to re-read *Middlemarch* - but I wouldn't say that it is one of my favourites.

I have read Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, but in my notebook I summarised the story rather than saying what I thought about it. If you want to read a superior American campus novel, and perhaps you don't want to read any campus novel, then I recommend John Williams' *Stoner* - though it's a very different kind of campus novel.

David:

Thanks for the recommendation. I must re-read *Middlemarch* some day myself. I actually produced it for Standard Ebooks, so I read it pretty closely the first time. Her *Daniel Deronda* is also very good.



And that's all for this issue. See you in a couple of months.

THE MEGALOSCOPE

Acknowledgement of Country

I acknowledge the members of the Wurunderi Willum Clan as the Traditional Owners of the land on which this publication is produced in Mill Park, Victoria, and I pay my respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging.

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